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The Probate Record of William Wilson, Charleston Merchant

By Lisa Hudgins

The past is loathe to give up its secrets. As scholars, we wade through hundreds of probate records and wills, hoping for the shop door which is left ajar, or the window, which is left partially open to the reveal the contents inside. Often, we are looking for the commonplace: the wooden chair in the corner; linens, which were left out to dry; or the pineapple teapot, which sits on the corner table. It is the "daily-ness" of things, which we seek, and that is most often overlooked in the attempts to gauge the "worth" of the individual. We are instead given an abridged version of the facts, and a bottom line—the assumed value of an individual's worldly goods. In 1764, a door to the life of Charleston merchant William Wilson was laid open as his probate inventory was set forth in public record. Appraisers (and fellow merchants) John Vaux, James Fowler, and John Giles began the inventory of Wilson's estate in November of that year, and documented an extraordinary list of the ordinary things, which made up the Charleston household. The detailed knowledge about ceramics points to the appraisers' occupation as merchants in Charleston, which can be validated through their advertisements in The South Carolina Gazette. John Vaux and John Giles had shops on Elliott Street, in the merchant district. Vaux advertised ceramics and Giles was a dry goods merchant. Their expertise would have been critical in the appraisal. The items found in Wilson's shop were those you might find in any home: fabric and sewing implements, iron and tin utensils and cookware. Spectacles and looking glasses were listed alongside toys, wallpaper, and gunpowder. Ready-to-wear clothing for men and women, a recent phenomenon, could be had along with hosiery, gartering, and a large inventory of handkerchiefs made of silk or cotton were also available. In the "shew glass," a display case or shop window, ribbons and silver buttons were displayed. Along with household items were food items—pounds of mustard, cases of sugar, and almonds. There were also cases of a concoction called "Stoughton's Elixir," a compound of aloe, cascarilla, rhubarb, wormwood, germander, gentian, orange peel, (the occasional bit of absinthe) and alcohol, possibly rum or wine; it was first patented in 1712, and remained popular well into the mid-19th century. It was known for its properties as a tonic and stimulant. The living spaces attached to the shop were also inventoried and the appraisers again showed their expertise as they presented a detailed list of furniture, including the wood used for each piece. Downstairs, we discover a walnut desk, some hickory chairs, two mahogany tables, and a gun cutlash and cartouch box. Upstairs were three bedsteads, a cypress table, and a backgammon table. The furnishings listed here suggest the lifestyle of an upper middle class merchant, with equipment for an office, entertaining, tea service, etc. Finally, we turn to perhaps the most impressive component of the inventory, the shop list of ceramics, enumerated not only by form, but also by ware type and price. Roughly 560 pieces of table and utilitarian wares made up Wilson's ceramic inventory, which ranged from colorful tea wares to stone crocks and red ware milk pans. These items may appear to be middling class, but by the time of Wilson's death, they could be found in nearly every household in colonial Charleston.

Figure 1: Leaf dish, soft paste porcelain. (Photograph by Lisa Hudgins)

Charleston Trade

By the mid-18th century, Charleston had become one of the most affluent cities in the American colonies, with roughly seven times the per capita wealth of Boston, and eight times the income of New York. Many residents could well afford the broad range of goods imported for resale in the Charleston shops. Wilson's inventory was not necessarily at the very top of the Charleston economic scale; it was a modest sum by 18th century Charleston's standards. Wilson's total goods, listed as roughly 1,657 Carolina pounds, would be the equivalent of $38,000 in 2007 dollars. At the time of the appraisal, advertisements in The South Carolina Gazette indicate that merchants were selling goods at eight-to-one and nine-to-one, a reference to the exchange rate between Carolina pounds and Pounds Sterling. If the economy warranted a dramatic cut in the exchange rate, then the goods in Wilson's shop may have been appraised at that same "lower" rate.

Yet, based upon the contents of the

probate record, his shop was certainly appealing to the middle and upper middle class households. Wilson might have tried to locate his shop near other middling class merchants, perhaps on Bedon's Alley, Elliott or Tradd Street. Previous research (Calhoun et al, 1985) points to the "geographic spread" of Charleston's merchant community, and teases scholars with the possibility of deliberate shopping districts on Bay, Broad, Tradd, and Elliott Streets. The location of the mercantile district close to the wharves on Bay Street in Charleston is no accident. "Rates of Carriage" listed in The South Carolina Gazette show a carriage fee of five shillings to Church Street, and seven shillings to Meeting Street. Depending upon the number of carts necessary to move cargo from the wharf to the shop, long distances away from Bay Street and the commercial wharves could prove to be costly to a busy merchant.

Indeed, it was the trade connections, which seem to have driven the mercantile system of Charleston. The South Carolina Gazette posted marine diaries—ships entering and leaving port. Advertisements boasted the latest goods arriving from the Northeast, London, and the Islands; and customs records form the major ports document ship's cargo ranging from rice and indigo to porcelain and tea. Merchants' records also point to the influence of trade patterns on availability of goods. From 1760-1766, an account book from Hogg and Clayton, lists ships and their cargo being imported, including the names of factors and wholesale markets in London for each shipment. When we compare account records with the names of known earthenware and porcelain dealers in London, we can match three of the companies to Charleston shipments. Isaac Ackerman and John Scrivener of Fenchurch Street, London, were glass and porcelain dealers whose goods were shipped to Charleston in the 1760s. Richard Addison and James Abernathy exported delft and refined earthenwares from their business at Wapping. Addison later joined with John Livie, also of Wapping, for sales of white stoneware, etc. Existing records for the London exporters may allow us to trace the sources for their merchandise, providing a direct lineage from English potter to Carolina household.

The Ceramics Market

At the time of William Wilson's probate, merchants were selling every type of ceramic available to the colonial customer, though trade restrictions and import duties may have caused some fluctuation. The ceramics available to Charleston buyers fell into three main categories, based upon cost and usage pattern. At the top, were tea and tablewares made of Chinese porcelain, including blue and white, enameled, and gilt wares. Extant porcelain dinner services in Charleston, as well as archival and archaeological evidence make it clear that porcelain was being imported. While the majority of Wilson's inventory was stone and earthenware, there is some question about the existence of porcelain in Wilson's shop. There are references to "blue and white" cups, and enameled wares, which may or may not point to sale of porcelain.

Figure 2: Coffee pot and lid, black glazed red earthenware. (Photograph by Lisa Hudgins)

Wilson's shop inventory consisted primarily of refined earthenwares and white salt-glazed stoneware. Brightly colored creamwares in the shape of cauliflower, pineapples, and melons were imported from London and for sale in the shop, along with tortoiseshell or "clouded" wares. While occasionally employed in upper class households, these colors and shapes were quickly subsumed by the middling Charleston household. White salt-glazed stoneware was more durable and slightly less expensive than porcelain, making it more practical for everyday use. In Wilson's shop, we find tea sets made of earthenware, with white stoneware cups sold separately.

At the lower end of the economic range, were Delft (English or Dutch tin-glazed wares), and the utilitarian types: Nottingham and gray stonewares, and milk pans or patty pans made of coarse red earthenware. These wares, while not expensive, made up about one third to one half of the inventory of William Wilson's shop, and would have been found in every household. Cooking, dairying activities, and the regular day-to-day storage of food required a sturdy vessel. So, like the Pyrex, zip-loc, and corning ware of modern times, the redware and stoneware of our colonial predecessors was ubiquitous.

Form and Function

The Charleston table could range from the informal to the sublime. At its apex, the formal table could employ dozens of dishes presented in a number of culinary deposits, each more lavish than the last. Merchants like William Wilson had to provide wares for both the formal dinner party of the plantation owner and the

Figure 3: Hand painted teapot, cream-colored earthenware. (Photograph by Lisa Hudgins)

simple family dinner of a craftsman. The formal dining table was a mélange of vessel forms. Meals would have included fruits and vegetables, meat (both wild and domestic), fish, poultry, turtles, and grain products (corn or grits, rice, breads, cereals, etc.). Fish could be found fresh, dried, or salted. Meats, including pork, veal and beef, were often preserved, except during the seasonal slaughtering. Vegetables were served fresh, boiled, baked, or preserved as pickles or sauces. Fruit, including plums, oranges, and nectrons, was pickled, but was also available fresh from local orchards.

The primary table service, usually of porcelain, white stoneware, or a refined earthenware, consisted of a soup/serving tureen with matching dinner and soup plates, saucers, pickle dishes, etc. Other specialty pieces filled out the table or were reserved for specific courses. Table 1 shows the variety of forms sold in William Wilson's shop. The elegant nature of this dining experience was further defined by the strict rules of etiquette, which were embraced by the colonial elite and mimicked by those aspiring to become part of the Charleston "select." Good manners and appropriate behavior became so important that recipe books began to include discourses on table settings, and guides to good behavior were written for the aspiring young gentleman or gentlewoman. Knowledge of these subtle rules determined one's status among Charleston social circles.

The Tea Table

By the third quarter of the 18th century, the network of taverns was appended by a series of new coffeehouses and teahouses as annual tea consumption in Britain went from 3.8 million pounds in 1767 to 7.1 million pounds in 1770. The account book of Hogg and Clayton, Charleston importers, shows a shipment of 28 chests of tea arriving in a single shipment from London in April 1766, amounting to over 700 pounds. Charleston was already embracing tea culture at the time of Wilson's death, as evidenced by the inclusion of at least 56 teapots or tea sets in his shop inventory. The introduction of tea brought a new facet to the societal hierarchy in the colonies. Initially, the use of tea was limited, as it was too expensive for many households; tea drinking may have been embraced by the upper classes as an elitist phenomenon. The ceremonial aspect of tea was imported from the East and grafted into "civilized" society. As tea drinking moved from public venues to the home, elaborate tea service "rituals" began to define the level of respectability attained by a young lady or gentleman. Eventually, however, middle class aspirations and economic fluctuations allowed tea drinking to become de riguer in many social circles, and tea wares became a standard in many Carolina homes. Staffordshire historian John Thomas suggests that if tea had not become popular in Europe in the 18th century, ceramics would never have developed at the exponential rate that occurred in the 18th century. According to one local tavern owner, "Tea from pewter was too hot, tea from wood was not pleasant, and horn 'tot' was not suitable." The clay body in porcelain and stoneware acted as an insulator against the scalding hot tea, and was readily accepted as the vessel of choice for the new beverages. As the popularity and ritual significance of tea drinking combined with the increasing importation of Chinese porcelains, European potters were encouraged to meet the challenging and lucrative market, which was unfolding before them.

The concept of the tea set changed in the 18th century as focus shifted from the traditional Chinese to a more Western assemblage. In the Oriental style, teacups did not have handles, were usually two to two and a half inches high. The saucers were deep, and teapots were squat and round. Sugar and milk were not added to the teacup by the Chinese, so the associated creamer or milk pot and sugar bowl were later additions, as use of tea with sugar expanded in Western circles. Forms introduced by early East Indies traders evolved to meet Western standards of consumption. By the 1760s, the set might consist of a teapot, which was low and round, and/or a coffee pot, which was tall and slender (ht:10-12 inches); six to 12 cups or teacups with or without handles, six to 12 saucers, a slop bowl, a lidded sugar dish, a lidded milk pot, and caddy. The tea service was often manufactured and purchased as a single set, with the lidded milk pot assuming a similar form to the coffee or teapot, only smaller (approximately five inches in height). There were actually several types of cups used for beverage service. Teacups as defined above, were smaller than the handled coffee cups. Chocolate cups were similar in style, but could have two handles, and usually matched the chocolate pot.

In Wilson's inventory, we find tea sets consisting of the teapot, sugar dish, milk pot, and slop bowl. The cups and saucers were listed separately, and were primarily made of white salt glaze stoneware. A reference to breakfast china is used to distinguish the special use sets from the regular tea wares. Breakfast china, also referred to as a petit dejeuner service (from the French term for breakfast) or cabaret were usually smaller sets of tea wares, designed to be carried to the bedroom or breakfast room. The set included a matching pot, cup and saucers, milk pot and sugar bowl, and a tray. It is clear that the gentlemen assigned to probate Wilson's estate were aware of current trends in fashionable tea services and understood the nuances of fine dining in Charleston's upper classes. They left an exquisite snapshot of the latest trends in Charleston ceramics. While we still know little about William Wilson's personal life, the probate of his estate has shed a light on his business. Through advertisements, inventories, and archaeological remains, we can confirm that the diversity of goods found in his shop mirror that of Charleston's economic landscape. The bright colored wares reveal a local passion for the latest botanical styles. Porcelain sherds are a reminder of Charleston's great wealth. Remnants of coarse earthenware pans and crockery reflect the need for practical, utilitarian wares. Likewise, the presence of tea accoutrements confirms the use of tea or coffee in many of the Charleston households. The Charlestonian and his family attended to the necessary social requirements of a planter or merchant class household, providing distinguished guests with afternoon refreshment as the occasion warranted. From the inventory of William Wilson, it appears that Charleston merchants were able and willing to meet the demands of this socially adept group of consumers.

Inventory of Ceramics in the Estate of William Wilson

34 Delf bowls & 33 Delf plates
21 Black and Enamd Tea Potts
3 doz Quart Stone Muggs No 1,
2 doz & 7 ditto No 2
3 doz & 9 pint ditto No 4
8 doz white Stone Cups and Saucers
1-1/2 doz milk potts &
1/2 doz mustard potts
8 Flower horns & 11 Sugar dishes
8 Butter boats & 5 pr Salts
1 Large Tureen
1 doz Stone plates & 8 Stone fruit dishes
1 doz pint Stone muggs &
3 Chamber pots,
5 Wash hand basons
2 Green fruit dishes & Stands
2 ditto tea potts & 2 Milk potts
1 Butter tub & stand & 1 Sugar dish 5 fruit dishes
12 doz Stone cups & Saucers
2 Doz Blue & White ditto
1-1/4 doz Stone Coffee Cups
2 painted glass flowerpots,
16 Common wine Glasses
1 doz small green plates, 1 Doz larger,
2 large Oval Dishes 4 smaler ditto
4 smaller ditto 6 large pickle leaves
4 Smaller ditto 4 Small pickle leaves
1 Doz large Tortoiseshell plates,
1/2 doz smaller ditto
1 Doz Blue Dutch plates, 1 doz Breakfast ditto
1 Coleflower tub & stand,
1 pineapple ditto
1 coleflower Sugar dish and milk pott,
1 Tea pott & milk pott
1 Tortoiseshell Tea pott 2 sugar boxes,
3 milk potts & 3 slop bowles
3 enameled Tea potts
3 sugar dishes & 2 milk potts
1 Doz Black Gilt [teapots]
1 Pr large faces & 2 pr smaller ditto
3 Barbers basons 3 bottles and stands
2 large oval dishes 3 smaller ditto
4 round ditto
1 doz Stone plates
6 Large Black Gilt Tea Pots 6 small do
3 white stone butter boats
3 Tortoiseshell ditto 3 ditto Tea potts
3 ditto Ditto
3 do Barl pint mugs & 1 smaller ditto
6 Black half pint ditto
1 Blk Bbl Quart mugg
1 doz Notingham Quart mugs
2 doz white Quart ditto
1 doz Dutch pint ditto
1 doz Notingham pt do
1/2 doz white Stone pint Do
1 doz 3 pt Bowles
1/2 Doz Galn Do, 1 Doz qut do
1 doz patty pans

Table 1: Ceramics from William Wilson's Probate Inventory.

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